

Back Again, Back Again: Lessons and Teachers

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twelve: Lessons and Teachers.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Rhia brought me a list the next day of words she thought I needed to know. That night, under the stars, we worked through the list together, laughing. Each Rhysesan word had a story to go with it in her strange old English -- when she'd learned the words she now taught me -- whether they came from the home she hardly remembered or with Cassian, sitting around the dining table with the Kings back when she was still small. Each time she brought up Cassian, it was a glimpse into their shared history: a look into the friendship they shared, however stilted it had become by the roles they had to play. She explained to me, love in her voice, that the woman that had taught her English -- the old *menstrana de eligida*, the one that had been trained in case I had come then -- had created a story for each new word she taught her, so they would all stick in her head. Just like Rhia did for me, then.

We burned each list before the sun came up, and she presented me with a new one every night before we began to wander.

She laughed at me a lot, but that's probably because I sounded like the equivalent of the boys in my Spanish class drawling out words in their thick southern accents.

Ehs-scree-bihr. Coh-mehn-zahr. It was fine that she laughed, after I got over the first embarrassment of it -- her laugh was beautiful, out in the starlight, free and wild, full of joy. She showed me how to write in pretty calligraphy like she was taught, with heavy nibbed pens and a bottle of ink, even though I smeared it before it dried, most of the time. She snuck me out onto the roof via the trellises and the archways, that, if you kept your balance on just so, you could scatter across without falling.

I learned more words than Cassian had taught me, than I ever learned in court, but I kept them a secret -- because she would tell me to, with thick worry lines between her brows as she did so. *Don't tell. Don't let them know.* Even though this was what I had come to her for, to become a better version of Ilyaas, I wouldn't betray her trust by speaking them aloud by day.

But it had benefits, this silence: I started to pick up more words in the days I spent in court. They talked much faster than we ever did, her exaggeratedly slow, me stumbling over my words as I tried to conjugate verbs and set up the correct sentence structure in my head as the words tripped out. But they were there -- words I wasn't supposed to know -- *kill* and *treason* and *growing numbers*. Cassian and I sparred and I surprised him by cursing my loss in Rhysaen, and in the moonlight Rhia and I would shove our window open and explore.

The conversations at dinner began to make ounces of sense -- the ones the kings and Cassian had in Rhysean, the ones they switched languages for because they didn't want me to know. But

I kept that to myself, too, little bits of knowledge to save for a later day.

I taught Rhia more English, too, and told her about my world. This -- world. Somewhere far away -- maybe sitting in the same place in a different dimension -- a girl knows the words for *record player* and *cell phone* and *camera* and all the slang I could remember -- though I won't dare to contaminate this record with that last bit. It was -- cute, in the platonic-love sort of way, hearing her formal English and Rhysaen accent come out around concepts I thought I'd left behind.

And life continued, star-skies becoming a separate time than my days. Another party was planned, sometime in the future, as the kings and prince and I sat breakfast. I was given a speech and Rhia as a pronunciation guide and was told to memorize it for the occasion -- and, at my pleading, managed to reduce my time in court in order to dedicate energy to learning the words they'd set for me. The concepts the queen said the speech covered didn't quite match my knowledge of the language, but I attributed it to allusions and metaphor and nonliteral translations. I didn't always believe her, but Cassian assured me it was the right words. I believed him.

And one night, near a week before the new party, Rhia and I sat in my room sometime late in the night or early in the morning and contemplated how poorly my memorization was going.

I don't know your level of experience with foreign language, listener, but when you've got nothing to link it to, memorizing *sucks*. Because -- queen's orders -- beyond a brief overview of the speech, that was all I got. No word-for-word translations allowed. Rhia wasn't to define words for me if I asked, and this direct order circumvented the wild bits of starlight and gray area that we'd sought out in the weeks past -- and she kept quiet, no matter how much I pestered or pleaded

or teased. This was annoying, at the time, but it didn't set off red flags, gods know why.

But, either way, it was late at night or early in the morning, and we were both procrastinating. I knew it wasn't going well when she put a hand on my jaw to try and force my mouth into the right shape for one particularly long word.

We have time, she said, somewhat desperately.

We have time, I echoed back, about as despairingly.

We didn't have that much time. But also, the thought of trying to remember the difference between *noc* and *niltim* and *nocim* and *iltim* made me want to cry.

Rhia flopped down on the bed. *I have an idea*, she said, *but it's a bad one*.

Anything that stopped me from wanting to stab myself with my sword sounded like a good idea to me. *I'm in*.

She kicked at me from where I sat on the edge of the bed. *You don't even know the plan*.

Plan? I'm intrigued.

She hesitated. *There's a tavern. Three -- what's the word -- hamlets over. It's not -- fancy -- but it's interesting. There's music*.

I was sold. *I'm all for music. And a lack of fance. And --*

You're not allowed to say a word, she said, *because we don't speak like The Book there, understand? You either use Rhysean or you keep your mouth shut. And you leave the sword behind. And you cover your hair*.

And we're back by dawn, I added, *because Cassian will show up around then to drag me outside and make me run with him*.

It's a deal, she said. *I know a way. Let us go*.

So... we snuck out through the open window. Rhia braided my hair up and around my head into a crown, and I pulled a hooded cloak from my wardrobe to complete the disguise. We whispered

our way across the rooflines and shuffled our way along window ledges until we reached the ground, then, giggling, my heart in my throat, ran for the treeline, our shoes making the faintest patterning noises along the ground. Clutching my hand in the dark and moonlight, the trees looming over us, breathing in their own, Rhia pulled me through the woods until we emerged out into a clearing, far from the city center.

The tavern, as the sign said, was called *Eligidanim Traem*.

It's -- not an easy thing to translate? *Eligidanim* is, like... we choose. But -- but excluding the *you* of *we*. *The rest of us, not you*. And *Traem*... is a funny word. It has two translations, as Rhia explained it to me. It's the name for a cheap kind of ale -- it's the kind of stuff you down if you're specifically trying to get drunk. But -- it's also a word for *decisions*... or, like *fates*? Kind of? Like... the combination of those two. Where choice and destiny meet. Because -- the joke is -- if you're drinking *Traem*, you're making the choice to give up the logical parts of your brain. Your rationale -- whatever. You're leaving it to destiny to not get your ass handed to you while you're on the stuff. So the name -- *we, not you, choose cheap beer* -- is odd, but a fine enough name for a tavern. But the name -- *we, not you, decide our destiny* -- and in combination with the word *Eligidanim*, that's a more accurate translation, it's -- well. It's the kind of place you find rebellion.

And -- as we made our way towards it, lights cast low in the houses all around us and the faintest smell of smoke on the air, I realized where we were.

This was the hamlet that Cassian and I had marched through after we burned the rebellion. The people had watched us pass. And though we had come as heroes, had come to take down the rebels, had come under the guise of peace and order, a place

that screamed to all who came *we choose our destiny, not you* seemed to be the type Cassian had been looking to send a message to when he and his soldiers had burned the rebels they'd killed.

Although I had tried not to think about it at the time, there was probably family of those we had killed in this town.

I double-checked that my hood was still on my head, and, feeling slightly more apprehensive, followed Rhia inside.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.